Why did York (KZN) *Really* 'Die'? – The Great Railway Myth.

Gavin Peckham – April 2025

Abstract

*The popular belief that the village of York became a 'ghost town' because the Wesleyan community successfully opposed the routing of a railway through their village is false. Apart from other factors it was principally the much earlier rerouting of the main Pietermaritzburg – Greytown **road** which bypassed York and which initiated the decline. The matter is discussed in more detail below.*

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This is one of several roads that lead to York. Sadly nowadays, there's not much to see once you get there. Lush fields of sugar cane grow in foreground whilst the unmistakeable profile of the Blinkwater graces the left-hand skyline.

The Essence of the York Railway Myth (YRM)

Due to the objections of the Wesleyan inhabitants of York, the Pietermaritzburg – Greytown railway branch line, completed in 1900, was diverted from a proposed route via York, to an alternative route via New Hanover. This rerouting of the railway, at the demand of the York Wesleyans, directly led to the demise of their own village.

The Persistence of the York Railway Myth

An oral version of the railway myth may have persisted over the years from 1900 when the line was built, until the 1960s when it first started to appear in print. The earliest version I have come across appeared in the *Natal Witness* in 1962 [1]. Since then, repetitions of the myth have appeared in an assortment of publications at regular intervals. A list of these articles appears as Item 7 in the Addendum – and there are probably several more that I have not yet come across.

The articles generally contain much interesting material pertaining to York but they also include the railway myth without, apparently, having investigated the matter any further.

The YRM is myth is essentially false. Despite this fact, its persistence can probably be traced to journalists catering for an eager public, who will not let a "good story" die – even if it is patently false.

The Basic Facts Behind the York Railway Myth

In the 1890s farmers in Umvoti county began to exert pressure on the Natal government to construct a railway line to Greytown in order to facilitate easier access to the markets in Pietermaritzburg and Durban. A "Blue Book" report [2] from 1896 describes the prevailing situation:

> *"... the good results of wattle-growing were mentioned ; this with all other industries will suffer through scarcity and expensiveness of transport by ox wagons."*

Initially it was proposed that the existing railway, running north from Durban to Verulam, (*See 1895 map on pg 6.*) be extended via Noodsberg to Greytown but this suggestion was soon rejected at a meeting of local residents held in New Hanover, on 27 April 1896.[3] Instead of the North Coast extension, they voted in favour of a branch line from Pietermaritzburg to Greytown. Whether the Colonial authorities paid any heed to this local opinion is unknown, but later the same year the Engineer-in-Chief of the railways reported: [4]

> *"Mr. T. L. Fyvie was dispatched in early December to see whether a line could be laid out down the Noodsberg toward the North Coast Line. The Engineer-in-Chief decided on the basis of the resulting report that the route would be too steep."*

Thus it was determined that the railway to Greytown would be a branch line from Pietermaritzburg rather than an extension of the North Coast line from Verulam. [5]

At that time there were, in principle, three possible routes for the branch line; a westerly route via York, a central route via Sterk Spruit, later known as New Hanover, or an easterly route via

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[1] See the list of articles on page 11.
[2] "Blue Books", Colony of Natal, Departmental Reports, 1896, pg B27
[3] Times of Natal, 27 April 1896. This report is copied as item 4 in the Addendum on pg 8.
[4] "Blue Books", Colony of Natal Departmental Reports, 1896, pg C33.
[5] See the 1903 map on page 8.

Noodsberg. These options were discussed at length at a public meeting in Sterk Spruit on 25 April 1897. [6] At this meeting there were, significantly, no objections to the route via York based on Wesleyan concerns about "bars, drink and other evils", and this despite the fact that many of the attendees, including my own Wesleyan forebears, lived in, or farmed near the village. The meeting voted overwhelmingly in support of the route via New Hanover, based purely on practical and economic grounds.

In any event, it is likely that the opinion of the locals had little or no effect on the authorities who, had conducted a "flying survey" [7](*) and quickly established that the route via Sterk Spruit was the most practical. That being the case, instructions were given on 19 May 1897 [8] to peg out the branch line via Sterk Spruit. Construction began later that year[9] and was completed in 1900.

(*) A "quick and dirty" evaluation by a small team of surveyors and support staff on horseback.

So where do the York Wesleyans come into the picture?

Well, at that time, York was the most well established settlement in the area and once a Greytown branch line was mentioned, it was widely assumed, especially by the good citizens of York, that the line would obviously be routed through their village. This prospect caused a shockwave of horror in the conservative Wesleyan community.

Being strict teetotallers, amongst other conservative views, they feared that the advent of a railway would bring "drink, loose women" and other associated evils to their village. The York postmaster at that time, John Wesley Franklin, sprang into action, drew up a petition against the railway and took it from door to door soliciting supporting signatures.[10] All this is true and is undoubtedly the basis of the YRM. However, the petition of the York citizens was simply a knee-jerk reaction to the possibility that the line might be routed through their village, something that, after the initial flying survey, was never going to happen anyway.

I can find no archival, or any other record, that the petition of York residents was ever submitted to any government official, let alone that it had any influence upon the final route of the Greytown branch line.

> ***So please let us put to bed the much repeated myth that the puritan Wesleyan community caused the railway to be diverted and, by this particular action, they were themselves responsible for the demise of their village.***

So Why Did the Village of York *Really* 'Die'?

Had the railway been routed though York, its fortunes may indeed have lasted a little longer. However, there are many other halts along the line (Impolweni, Harden Heights, Seven Oaks, etc) and none of them blossomed simply due to the railway passing through. The fortunes of a village depend on many factors and the presence of a railway is just one.

So, having dispensed with the railway myth, we are still left with the question, "*Why did the village of York **really** die?*"

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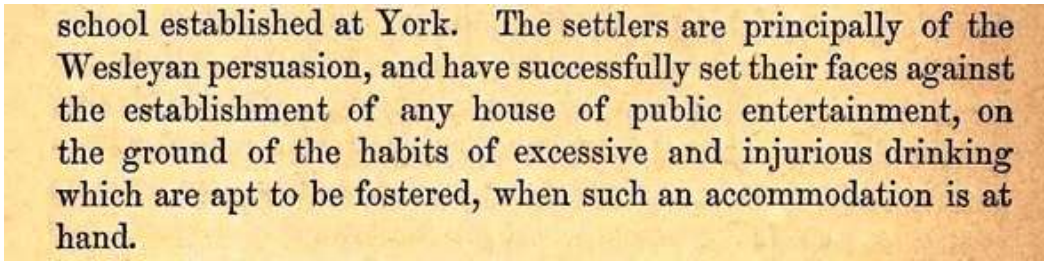
[6] The Times of Natal, 25 April 1897, reported on this meeting. See the second item in the Addendum on page 8.
[7] Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, file MJPW; Vol 42; Ref LW1010/1897.
[8] "Blue Books", Colony of Natal Departmental Reports, 1897, pg C37, item 17.
[9] See the 1898 map on page 7.
[10] I have this information from my father, Douglas Peckham, born in 1918 and raised in York. J.W. Franklin was his maternal grandfather.

I have little doubt that several factors were involved in York's decline and that each of these contributed to varying degrees. The earliest indication that problems lay ahead, came as early as 1859, from a publication [11] which makes some interesting observations about York. These include:


school established at York. The settlers are principally of the Wesleyan persuasion, and have successfully set their faces against the establishment of any house of public entertainment, on the ground of the habits of excessive and injurious drinking which are apt to be fostered, when such an accommodation is at hand.

From this we may conclude that the Wesleyan community, despite the fact that a railway was not even contemplated at that time, were strongly opposed the establishment of any bar, inn or hotel in the village from the outset. This would have left visitors with nowhere to stay unless they knew a local resident well enough to take a room with them. So from the village's inception in 1850, the stage was set to discourage any influx of 'undesirable' visitors. These conservative Wesleyan attitudes undoubtedly led to restrictions in the growth of the village – at least to some extent.

At a later stage, and over an extended period, I have little doubt, but no proof, that another contributing factor was the same reason that many other small villages fade into oblivion, both here and around the world – the younger folk move away to the cities and the older folk died out.

While these factors undoubtedly played a role, I believe that the main reason for York's gradual decline was a shift in the route favoured for the main road from Pietermaritzburg to Greytown. Until the 1870s this road went via York, whilst a track via Sterk Spruit received far less traffic. However, the relative popularity of these two roads began to change until, by the mid-1870s the Sterk Spruit option was now regarded as the main road to Greytown. Evidence for this may be found may be found in an 1875 archival document [12] which states,

> *"The Main Road to York, starting from...[13] ...on to the Umgeni River, crossed by a bridge at 12 miles and Herr Kremer's Hotel. At 14 miles the York Road branches off to the left reaching York - 18 miles - (Sketch herewith)[14]. Mr. Loft keeps this road in order from the Town* [PMBurg] *Lands Boundary to the 14 miles Fork, and does as little as possible on the York road, offering all its Force for the Main Cart Line to Greytown."*

Now by 1874 one of the original *Haidee* settlers, Robert Garbutt and his wife Mary, were reported to be the proprietors of a hotel at Sterk Spruit.[15] This is clearly marked on the 1875 road map mentioned in the extract above. Now both York and Sterk Spruit were about half way between Pietermaritzburg and Greytown and either of the aforementioned places would have made an ideal stopover or resting spot for travellers between the two larger towns. However, since York had no accommodation for casual visitors, the newly established hotel at Sterk Spruit may have had a significant influence in that route gaining favour over the previously more popular road

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[11] R.J. Mann, "The Colony of Natal", 1859, pg 140.
[12] Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, file CSO; Vol 510; Ref 1875/785
[13] At this point there is detailed description of the road from Pietermaritzburg to the Umgeni River.
[14] This sketch, accompanies the document mentioned in Footnote 12 and is copied on page 9.
[15] Reference 26 in https://theclarksofclarkroad.com/book/chapter-9-john-clark-of-york-natal/

through York. The 'road theory' is further supported by a pamphlet[16] which ascribes,

"… the rapid decline of York to the realignment of the road to Greytown."

So the rerouting of the main Pietermaritzburg – Greytown road, around 1875, was probably the main reason York's fortunes began to decline. This was supplemented by the other factors mentioned above and summarised in the following table.

Date	Issue	Wesleyan influence
1850 onwards	No hotels, bars or public lodgings were built.	Yes
1850 onwards	Young people left for the cities. Older folk died out.	No
1875	The main Pietermaritzburg – Greytown road via Sterk Spruit became favoured over the route via York.	Partly
1900	The Pietermaritzburg – Greytown railway line bypasses York.	No

No Wesleyan Railway Myth required !

York is Not Truly a 'Ghost Town'

Although it makes for good reading to refer to York as a 'ghost town', the fact remains that it has never been unpopulated. St John's Anglican Church holds regular monthly services, there has been a trading store most of the time and there have been at least two or three houses that have been continually occupied. So whilst York may now be shadow of its former self, it's not a ghost town – well, quite not yet.

Above: Looking across the York Commonage towards the plantations that now occupy most of the original village.

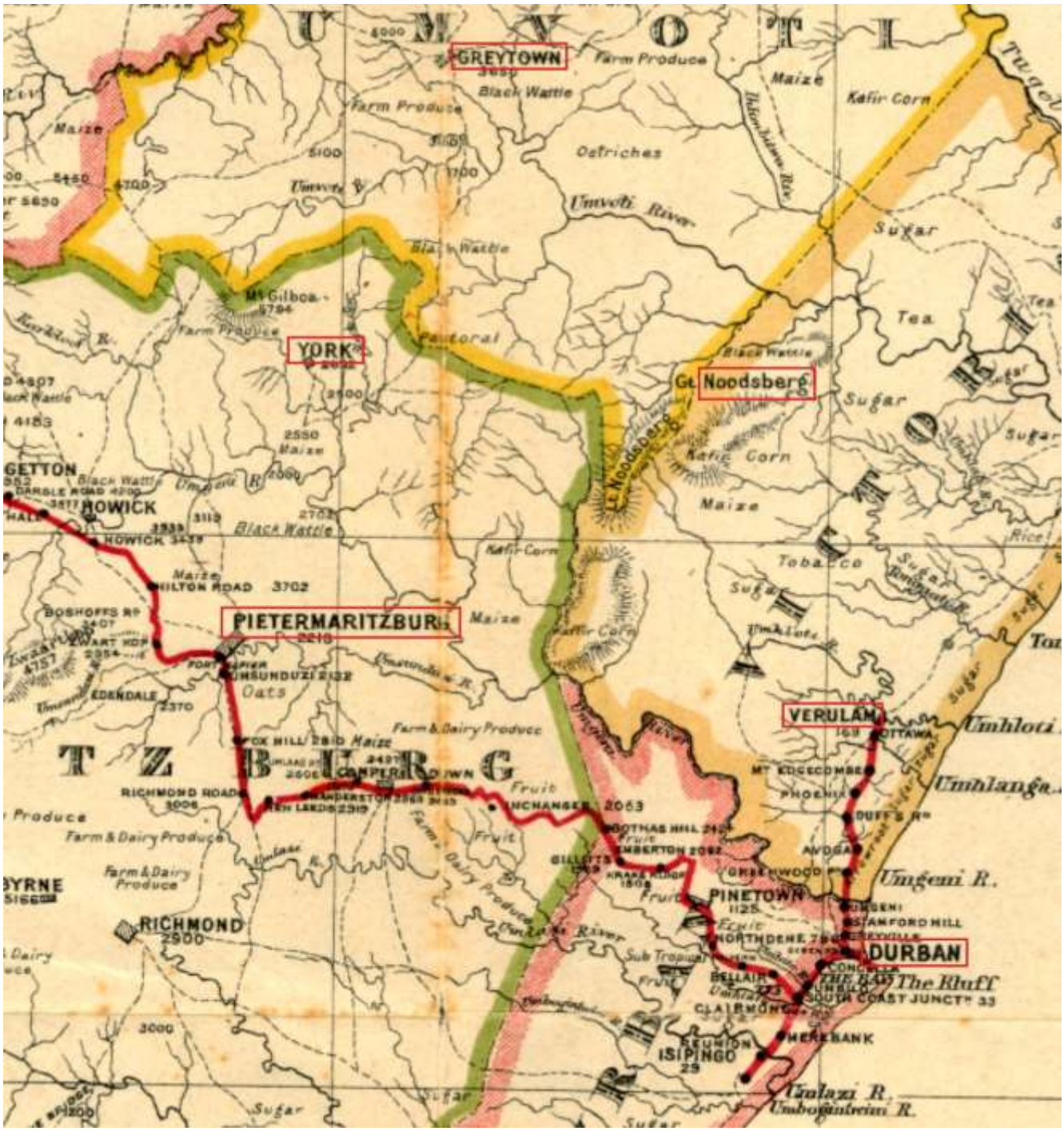
Right, top to bottom:
St. John's Anglican Church.
One of the very few remaining residences.
Store (left) and residence.

[16] Pamphlet issued by the Pietermaritzburg Publicity Association, "See Natal by Road". This is referenced without a date in an article by Elizabeth Martin, "York Library – why did it die?" a copy of which was given to me by Molly Mason of Howick in December 2004. The article appeared on pages 17 and 18 of a magazine produced by Epworth Junior School where Mrs. Martin was the librarian. Unfortunately, I have no date for the magazine, but probably the 1980s.

ADDENDUM

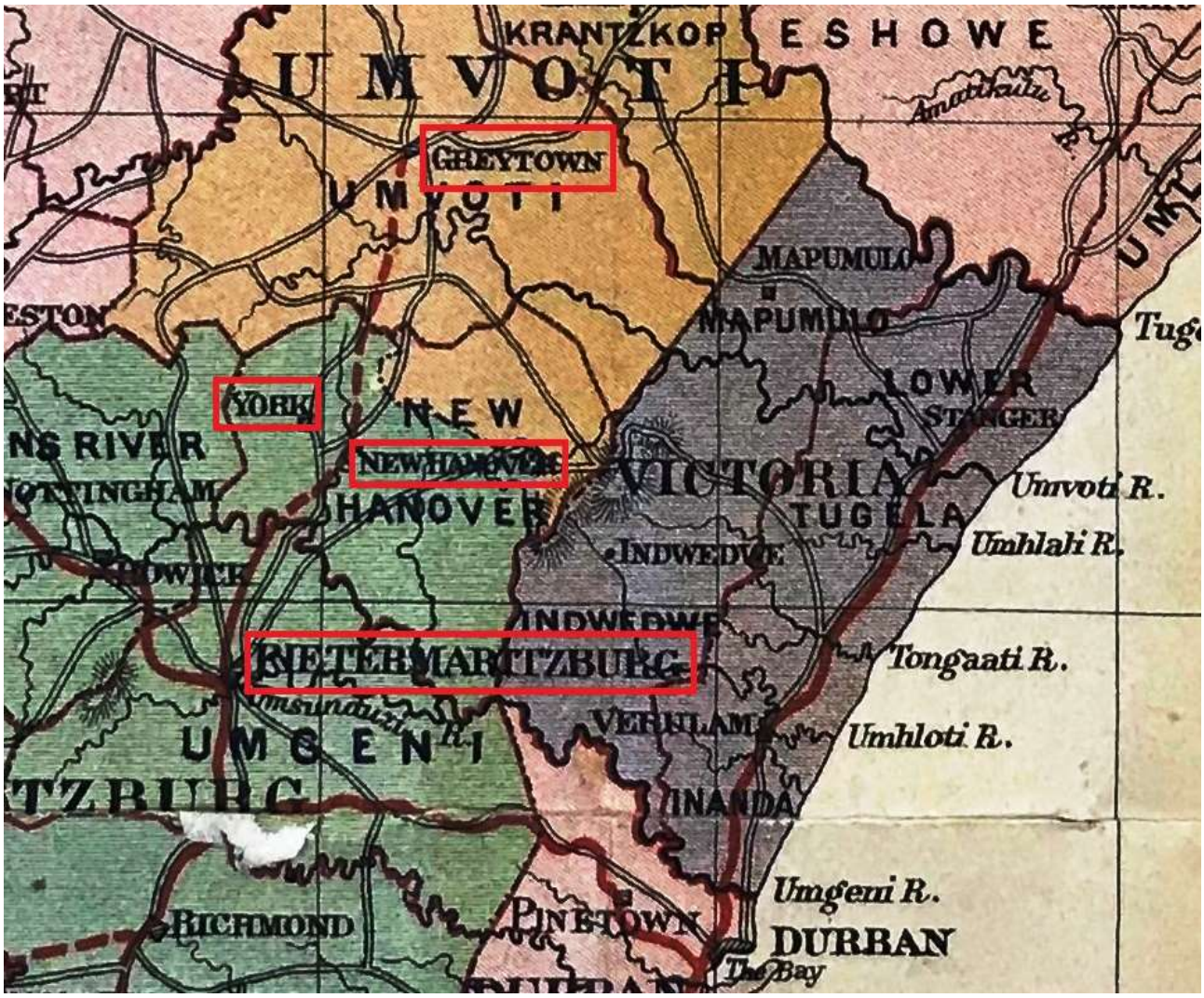
1. Natal Railways, 1895.

The railway lines at that time are shown in red. Note the line from Durban, north to Verulam. It was tentatively suggested to extend this line north-west, via Noodsberg, to Greytown.



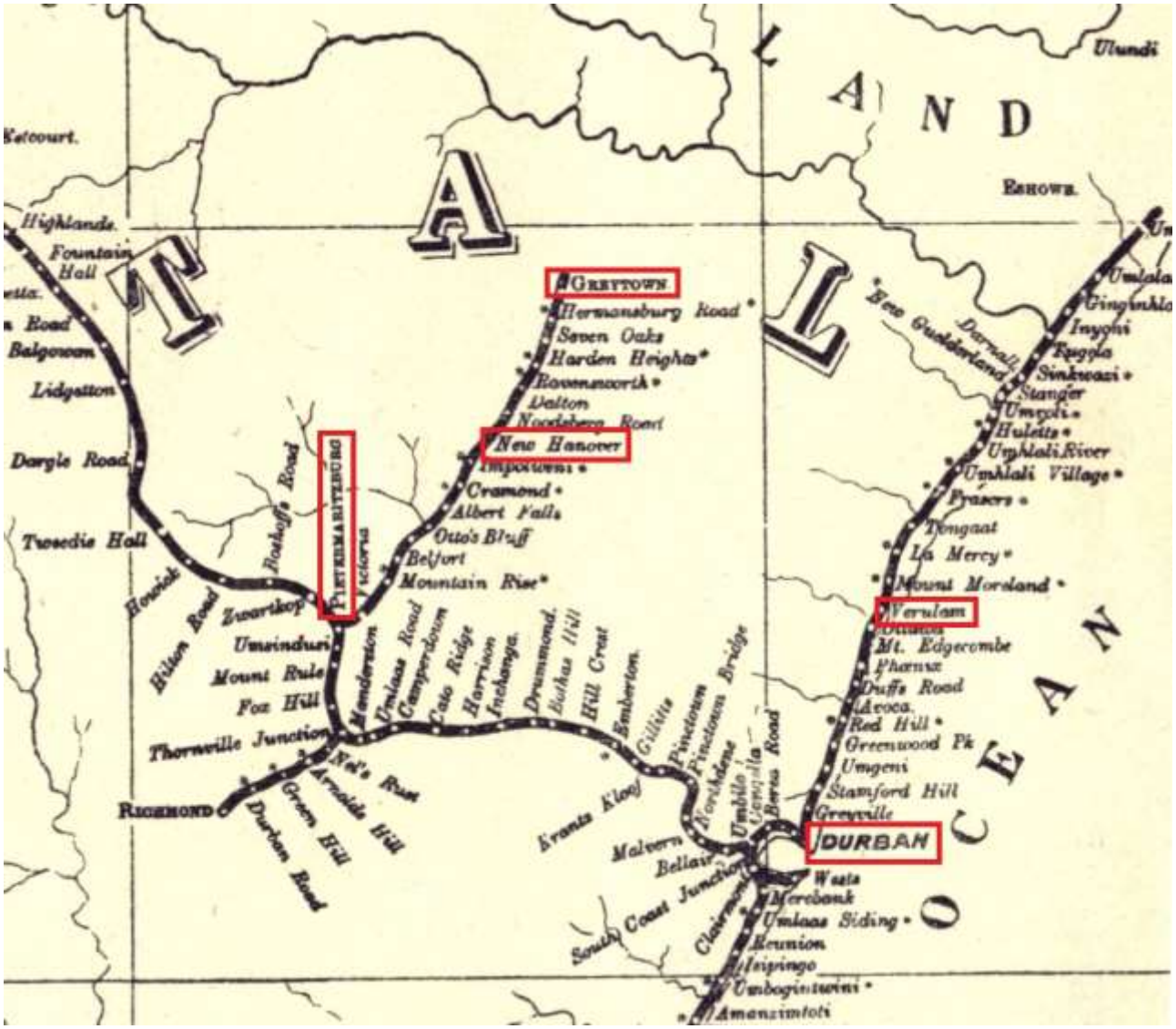
2. Natal Railways, 1898

The Surveyor General's map for 1898 shows the partial completion of the Greytown branch line from Pietermaritzburg to the Umgeni River as a solid red line, and the remainder of the project as a dashed red line.



3. Natal Railways, 1903.

This map shows the Natal Government Railway network in 1903, including the Pietermaritzbug – Greytown branch line which was completed in 1900.



4. The Times of Natal, Mon 27 April 1896

RAILWAY EXTENSION TO GREYTOWN - Sterk Spruit, Saturday (By Special Despatch).

A public meeting was held this forenoon at 10 o'clock, in the Schoolhouse, New Hanover, in connection with the proposed railway extension to Greytown. There were about thirty people present. The Rev. Mr. Scott moved:- "That this meeting approves of a line of railway extension from Pietermaritzburg to Greytown." An amendment in favour of a survey of a line from Durban to Greytown was rejected, only three voting for it. The resolution was carried 23 voting for it.

GDP: I have several more newspaper extracts on this issue. However, the one cited above contains the essence. Having disposed of the Durban line extension in favour of a branch line from Pietermaritzburg, a decision about the route from Pietermatitzburg to Greytown then arose.

5. The Times of Natal, Sterkspruit, 25 April 1897

RAILWAY EXTENSION. PUBLIC MEETING.

The Rev Mr Scott then said that they had now to consider what would be the best route for the railway between Pietermaritzburg and Greytown. There were three proposals: A direct line from Pietermaritzburg by Albert Falls, through York, past Crook's and Braithwaite's on to Greytown. He said he saw his friends Mr Peckham and Mr Mackenzie were glad at the mention of this route, and he too, would be glad if it were carried through. The line would only be about 40 miles long, and he was told, though he could not vouch for it, that it would pass through a property on which there was a 6 ft seam of coal. The second proposal was a line of railway from Pietermaritzburg past Albert Falls, then close along the line of the main road to Sterk Spruit, then on to New Hanover, Egmonton, Greytown Bridge and Greytown. A branch line of about eight miles could be formed from Egmonton to Noodsberg to catch any wattle bark that was there. The speaker would vote for this second proposed line because it was the most feasible. The third proposal was a line of railway from Pietermaritzburg to Greytown by way of Bayne's Drift and Noodsberg Road. This would be a very expensive line, and there would be least traffic by it. The speaker moved the following resolution:- "That this meeting recommend to Government the second scheme of railway with branch line."

Mr Schroder seconded.

Mr Edwin Peckham said if he looked pleased when Mr Scott spoke of the first of the three proposals his face was not an indication of his mind, because he thought the route described in the first of the three proposals would be a mistake. There was no doubt that it would go through nice-looking country, but then there would be no traffic. He preferred to support scheme No. 2. He did not think it was right to look to individual interests, but to what was for the benefit of the whole district. He supported Mr Scott's motion.

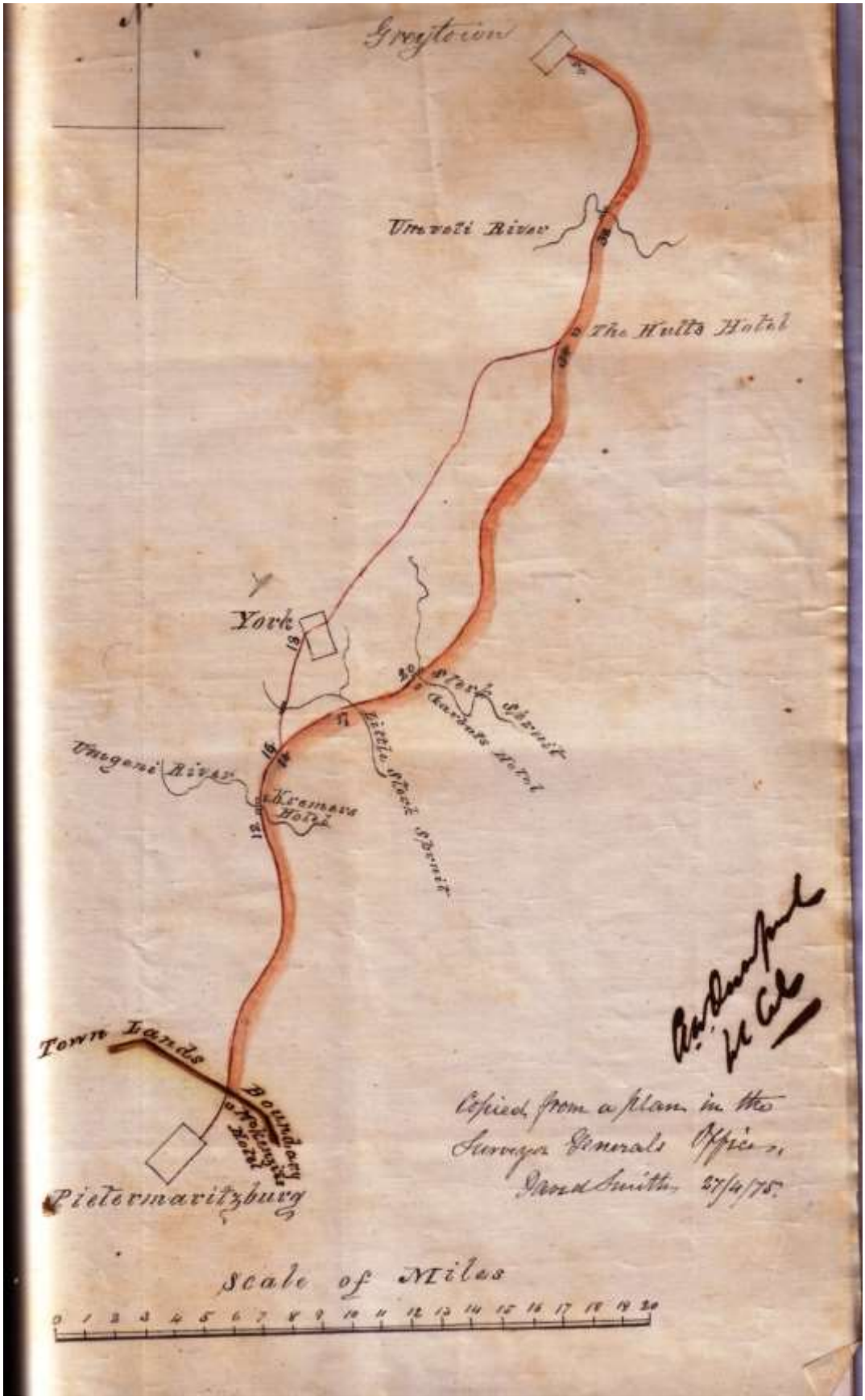
Mr Scott said he was sorry that Noodsberg Road must be kept out, but there was no feasible way of going by Noodsberg, because it was only a corner, and although he had looked over the country from every quarter, he could not see any way out of it.

The Chairman, in putting the motion to the meeting, said that he thought scheme No. 2. would necessitate a number of bridges being built along the proposed route.

There voted for the motion 25, and for the amendment 3. The motion was declared carried.

The meeting instructed the result of the meeting be reported to the Minister of Lands and Works.

6. 1875 Road Map



1875 Map from CSO; Vol 510; Ref 1875/785, shows the pre-1875 main road to Greytown via York and the post-1875 preferred route via Sterk Spruit (now known as New Hanover). Thus, back in 1875, long before the railway branch line to Greytown became an issue, York had already suffered the fate of having the main road to Greytown shifted to bypass the village.

7. Articles that Perpetuate the York Railway Myth

The YRM is repeated in the following list of articles. I have come across several more, but these are the ones that I have to hand. I must emphasise that the following list is cited purely as a matter of information and with no malice intended towards any of the authors who were probably only trying to meet editorial requirements.

(1) Natal Witness, "Saturday Magazine" supplement, 1962.
"*The Village that Signed Its Own Death Warrant*." Jenny Seed.

(2) Natal Witness, 23 May 1964, article by John Clark.

(3) Natal Witness, 1967. "*York - the Town of Four Familie*s." Harvey Campion.

(4) "*Stories from the Karkloof Hills*", C. S. Shaw. 2nd ed. 1990, pg 89. 1st ed. 1971

(5) Natal Witness, Wed, April 27, 1977, page 5.
"*Ghost Town's Church Celebrates Centenary*." Rodney Victor

(6) Natalia, Issue Number 7, December 1977, page 46.
"*York Church Commemorated*." D. H. Strutt and M. P. Moberly

(7) Epworth Junior School magazine, 1880s(?)
"*York Library – why did it die?*" Elizabeth Martin

(8) "Umvoti – Jewel of Natal" 1985, pg 162. ISBN 0-620-10707-03

(9) DIVERSIONS magazine, 1998, pp 12 - 16.
"*Small Town South Africa. YORK*." Claudio di Friuli

(10) AFRICAN PANORAMA magazine, pp 75 – 76.
"*Beyond the Tarmac*." Claudio di Friuli

(11) The Witness, 13 Feb, 2017.
"*The End of KZN's York Village*". Frans Prins

(12) Weg / Platteland magazine, Winter 2018, pp 76 – 88. See third column, pg 87.
"*Welkom in Klein Duitsland.*" Peter van Noord.

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